Creating Tomorrow's Government Leaders
An Overview of Top Leadership Challenges And How They Can Be Addressed

By: Ellen Van Velsor, Clemson Turregano, Bill Adams, and John Fleenor

Center for Creative Leadership®

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Introduction: The Changing Nature of Leadership in Government

The nature of government is changing. Social networks and media are creating a new level of transparency. Generational shifts, technological advancement, revenue challenges, and ever-present political change underscore the kinds of constant shifts occurring within the federal space.

VUCA is an acronym that has quickly found its way into the leadership lexicon. It stands for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—an apt description of the current and future leadership environment in government. **Government leaders must possess the skills to survive in this uncertain world and to perform their jobs while under constant observation from a range of sources**—from bloggers and other social media to traditional print and broadcast reporters.

This report explores the skills government leaders need to be successful in a VUCA environment. It is **based on an analysis of leadership effectiveness data from more than 16,000 managers working in the government sector** who attended leadership development programs at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®). The results indicate the top priorities for leader development in the government sector involve:

Leading employees well

Leading change

Developing participative management skills

Understanding boundaries and how to span them

The pages that follow provide details on CCL's study and introduce recommended strategies for addressing each of these critical leader development priorities.

Answering Two Key Leadership Questions

To better understand the leadership development challenges faced by government agencies, CCL conducted a study using its Benchmarks® competency framework. We focused on two important questions:

What leadership competencies are seen as most important for success in government organizations? Our Benchmarks database tracks 16 key leadership skills, as well as five derailment factors that can indicate a manager's career is in trouble. While each of these competencies is important to overall leader effectiveness, some are seen as more critical than others in different industries or sectors. **Knowing which competencies matter most in the government sector can help agencies create a leadership development strategy** that builds the capacities needed for greater effectiveness.

How well do government sector leaders perform in the competency areas most critical to success? It is important to know how the leadership skills in your organization match up with those identified as most important for leaders in the government sector. **Identifying leadership strengths and weaknesses enables an organization to determine how well individual capabilities align with organizational needs.** It also helps an organization identify significant discrepancies that need to be addressed through focused development and learning.

To answer these questions, we analyzed 160,752 evaluations of 16,431 government leaders. These data come from people working across the sector, including almost all of the agencies on the federal register. Respondents were asked to evaluate the leadership competencies of a boss, peer, or direct report using CCL's Benchmarks 360-degree leadership assessment.

Each evaluator rated the relative importance of key competencies for success, as well as the effectiveness of their coworkers at enacting each competency.

The Key Findings of the CCL Study

Government sector leaders have important strengths.

The ability to put people at ease is the competency most highly rated by coworkers of the government leaders we studied. Understanding that differences such as gender, race, and ethnicity matter is another strong point of government leaders. They are seen as quick to acquire new knowledge, they are resourceful, and they are **willing to do whatever it takes to achieve agreed upon goals**. These findings show that government agencies have a group of interpersonally skilled, intelligent, and committed leaders—a powerful asset on which to build.

The highest priority areas for leadership development in government are to improve the ability to lead employees, to manage change, and to engage in participative management.

Leading employees is seen by coworkers as the most important competency for government leaders, yet it is rated 15th among the 16 competencies in terms of leader effectiveness. Change management and participative management are also rated important by more than half of those responding, but are in the bottom half of the leadership competencies in terms of effectiveness.

Government sector organizations also need strategies for providing broad, cross organizational experiences and opportunities for learning.

Too narrow a functional (or departmental) orientation is the most likely reason for managers in government to derail. CCL research shows that **leading employees is something managers learn from a variety of experiences during their careers**. Leaders at all levels can encourage development of this competency by providing opportunities for their direct reports and high-potential leaders to reach outside their own functional or departmental experiences. A diversity of experiences (different assignments, developmental relationships, classroom training) round out skills and perspectives and reduce the possibility of derailment.

The Skills Tracked by Benchmarks

The Benchmarks 360-degree survey instrument CCL uses consists of 155 behavioral descriptors clustered into 21 scales. Sixteen of the scales rate leadership skills:

Resourcefulness. Can think strategically and make good decisions under pressure; can set up complex work systems and engage in flexible problem-solving behavior; can work effectively with higher management in dealing with the complexities of a management job.

Doing Whatever It Takes. Has perseverance and focus in face of obstacles; takes charge; is capable of standing alone, yet is open to learning from others when necessary.

Being a Quick Study. Quickly masters new technical and business knowledge.

Decisiveness. Prefers quick and approximate actions to slow and precise ones in many management situations.

Leading Employees. Delegates to employees effectively, broadens employee opportunities, acts with fairness toward direct reports, and hires talented people for his/her team.

Confronting Problem Employees. Acts decisively and with fairness when dealing with problem employees.

Participative Management. Uses effective listening skills and communication to involve others to build consensus and to influence others in decision making.

Change Management. Uses effective strategies to facilitate organizational change initiatives and to overcome resistance to change.

Building Relationships. Knows how to build and maintain working relationships with coworkers and external parties; can negotiate and handle work problems without alienating people; understands others and is able to get their cooperation in nonauthority relationships.

Compassion and Sensitivity. Shows genuine interest in others and sensitivity to employee needs.

Straightforwardness and Composure. Is steadfast, relies on fact-based positions, doesn't blame others for mistakes, and is able to recover from troubled situations.

Balance between Personal Life and Work. Balances work priorities with personal life so neither is neglected.

Self-Awareness. Has an accurate picture of strengths and weaknesses and is willing to improve.

Putting People at Ease. Displays warmth and a good sense of humor.

Differences Matter. Demonstrates a respect for varying backgrounds and perspectives. Values cultural differences.

Career Management. Develops, maintains, and uses professional relationships including mentoring, coaching, and feedback to manage own career.

Competency Rankings for the Government Sector

Though all the competencies measured by Benchmarks play a role in effective leadership, respondents are asked to rate the importance of the 16 leadership skills within their organizations by selecting the eight they see as most important. The data are then compiled into a rank ordering across aggregated responses from the government sector.

Table 1

Importance for Success Rankings
Sample Size = 160,752

Benchmarks Competencies	Rank	Percent Important
Leading Employees	1	86
Resourcefulness	2	81
Straightforwardness and Composure	3	68
Building and Mending Relationships	4	67
Participative Management	5	66
Decisiveness	6	58
Change Management	7	57
Doing Whatever It Takes	8	51
Being a Quick Study	9	44
Balance between Personal Life and Work	10	39
Self-Awareness	11	35
Confronting Problem Employees	12	34
Compassion and Sensitivity	13	33
Putting People at Ease	14	26
Differences Matter	15	25
Career Management	16	19

Table 2   **Leadership Effectiveness Rankings and Ratings**

Sample Size = 160,752

Benchmarks Competencies	Rank	Percent Important
Putting People at Ease	1	4.28
Differences Matter	2	4.23
Being a Quick Study	3	4.17
Resourcefulness	4	4.13
Doing Whatever it Takes	5	4.08
Straightforwardness and Composure	6	4.07
Decisiveness	7	4.03
Building and Mending Relationships	8	4.01
Participative Management	9	3.99
Compassion and Sensitivity	10	3.96
Change Management	11	3.95
Balance Between Personal Life and Work	12	3.94
Self-Awareness	13	3.89
Career Management	14	3.87
Leading Employees	15	3.86
Confronting Problem Employees	16	3.55

Derailment Factor Rankings for the Government Sector

Finally, Benchmarks asks respondents to rate leaders on five derailment factors that decades of CCL research show can stall or break a management career. They were identified by a series of studies comparing successful managers with those who are fired, demoted, or plateau early. The five derailment factors are:

Problems with Interpersonal Relationships: Difficulties in developing good working relationships with others

Difficulty Building and Leading a Team: Inability to select, develop, and motivate an effective team

Difficulty Changing or Adapting: Shows resistance to change and resistance to learning and developing in response to mistakes

Failure to Meet Business Objectives: Difficulties in following up on promises and completing a goal

Too Narrow a Functional Orientation: Lacking the depth needed to manage outside one's current function

Each of the five factors has been shown to limit a leader's effectiveness and long-term success. Our research shows the most serious derailment factor impacting managers in the government sector is "too narrow a functional orientation."

Table 3

Likelihood to Derail Rankings and Ratings
(All Observers)

Sample Size = 160,752

Derailment Scales	Rank	Average Rating
Too Narrow Functional Orientation	1	1.60
Difficulty Changing or Adapting	2	1.54
Failure to Meet Business Objectives	3	1.50
Difficulty Building and Leading a Team	4	1.49
Problems with Interpersonal Relationships	5	1.37

Note: Derailment scales are reversed: 1 = good, 5 = poor.

Identifying the Leadership Gaps

CCL's research shows government sector managers are skilled in several important areas, such as resourcefulness, straightforwardness and composure, building and mending relationships, decisiveness, and doing whatever it takes. Clearly, government leaders are recognized for their commitment, service to the nation, and unwavering dedication to their mission.

However, these same leaders fall short in several important areas. The gaps become evident when the rankings from the study are placed into a simple matrix:

The leadership skills ranked most important for success by people in government organizations:	The leadership skills ranked least important for success by people in government organizations:
Leading Employees	Confronting Problem Employees
Resourcefulness	Compassion & Sensitivity
Straightforwardness & Composure	Putting People at Ease
Building & Mending Relationships	Differences Matter
Participative Management	Career Management
Government leaders were rated most effective in the following categories:	**Government leaders were rated least effective in the following categories:**
Putting People at Ease	Balance between Personal Life & Work
Differences Matter	Self-Awareness
Being a Quick Study	Career Management
Resourcefulness	Leading Employees
Doing Whatever It Takes	Confronting Problem Employees

It is clear that those areas where government leaders are most effective do not align with the leadership skills ranked highest in importance. Most significant among the gap areas is the ability to lead employees. While this capability is ranked first among 16 leadership competencies in terms of importance, it is ranked 15th in terms of actual leader effectiveness across the government sector. **Government employees put a high value on the ability to lead others, yet there is notable room for improvement in how leaders perform this competency.** Government sector leaders also rank relatively low in terms of change management and participative management, both capabilities ranked among the top eight in importance for success.

What are the implications of these findings? Leading employees in the government sector is highly challenging, and leaders can benefit from further development on the key skills required to create direction, alignment, and commitment among their employees. Core skills in this arena include identifying and hiring talented staff, delegating and following up, and developing employees.

Government sector leaders also can learn more about responding to and managing change and can develop a more participative leadership style. This means **placing greater emphasis on involving others in decision making and getting more input before taking action.** These are skills that can be developed through training initiatives focused on enhancing self-awareness and by working with a coach over time. Government leaders also can avoid a major career derailment factor by looking for opportunities to work outside their functional or organizational silo and broadening both their experience and perspective.

Closing the Gaps

To close the leadership gaps in the areas we've identified, it is important to understand the specific skills and behaviors required and how they are best developed. Below we offer a starting point for understanding what it takes to develop effective leadership skills in each of the three areas ranked most critical to the government sector while also avoiding the narrow silo-like focus that can derail a career.

1. Leading Employees

Recent studies suggest that younger generations entering the workplace see leadership development as a standard requirement for success. Agencies who seek to retain top talent often focus on leadership development programs, identifying high potentials, and making sure they have training and development opportunities that offer them a broad and deep foundation for moving forward within the organization. **Truly innovative organizations offer leadership development across all employee categories**, creating a shared language of leadership that serves to increase efficiency within the agency.

2. Change Management

Developmental assignments are the lynchpin for leaders with the confidence to manage change. **Assignments that are out of their primary technical area provide a different perspective.** They can see how their technical area fits into the greater whole so they can understand and manage change better across the organization. Mentoring offers a low-cost approach for broadening a leader's perspective. Mentors can pass on institutional knowledge and offer insight. When paired with a mentee from outside their own technical area, even the mentor has the opportunity to learn and to become more adept at managing.

3. Participative Management

Many authors writing about the future focus on five interrelated themes: relationships, information, networks, technology, and demonstrated results. Those in government who seek to remain in their own silo are doomed to obsolescence. **Successful leaders of the future will use technology to focus direction, create alignment, and reinforce commitment through participative management.** They will create an environment of shared collaboration that will provide the structure needed to clarify ambiguity, lower volatility, reduce uncertainty, and make the complex more simple. Effective leaders will recognize the importance of their own organization, connect with others, be comfortable with technology, and be readily transparent about their decisions. This means government leaders must seek to go beyond their internal and external organizational boundaries to create resources through relationships and organizational synergies that exceed the needs of clients and stakeholders.
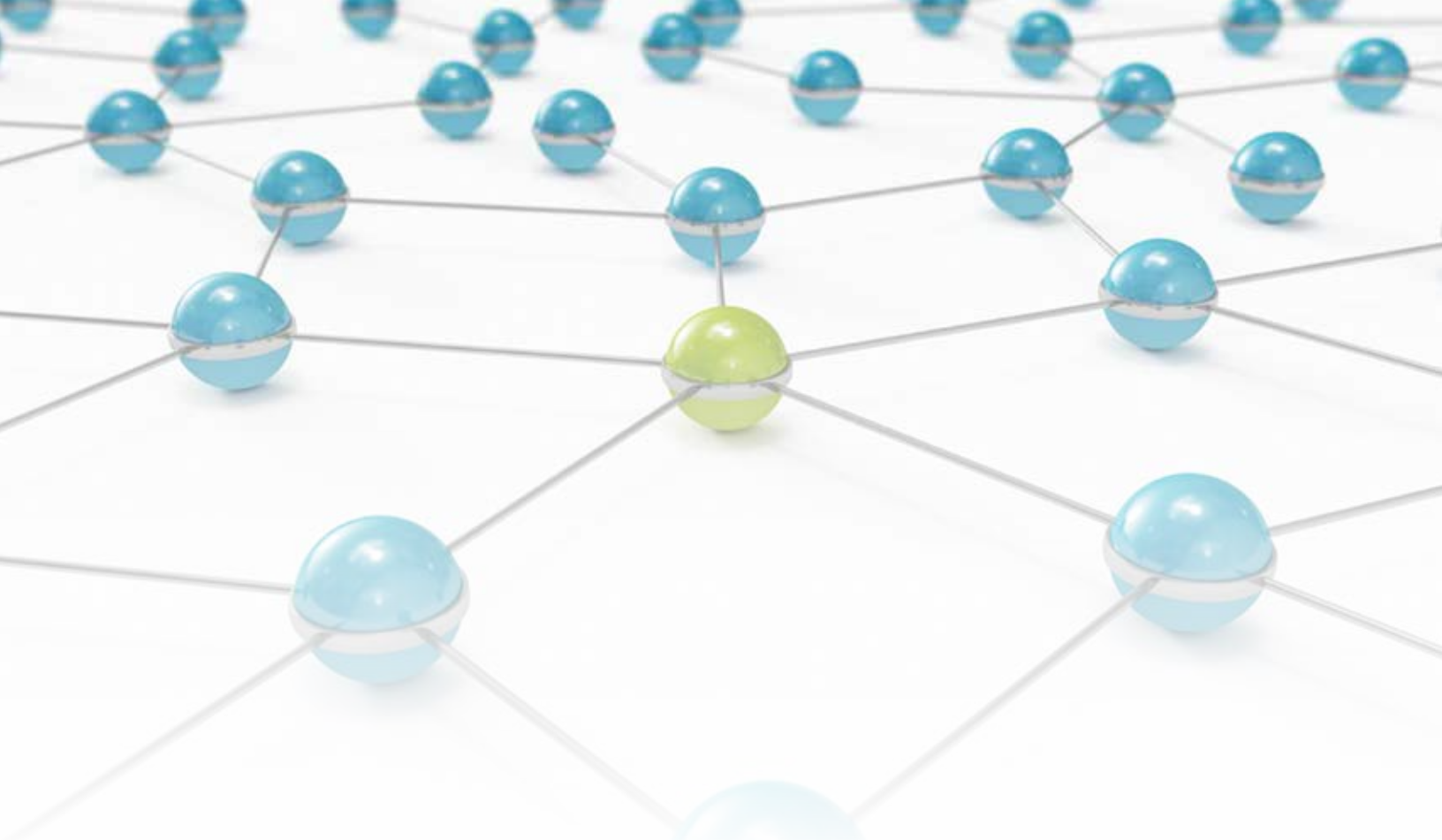
Conclusion: The Implications for Leadership Development

In an environment that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA), government organizations cannot afford to put resources into generalized leadership development and simply hope they will achieve the right outcomes. Instead, **well-targeted leader development initiatives are essential to close critical competency gaps and ensure individual and organizational success.** Effective and well-trained leaders will be able to meet the nation's needs, manage the work, and find innovative and effective solutions to complex challenges.

Using CCL research as a starting point, government agencies have the opportunity to reassess their current leadership capacity and can begin focused efforts to develop skills their leaders need both today and for the future.

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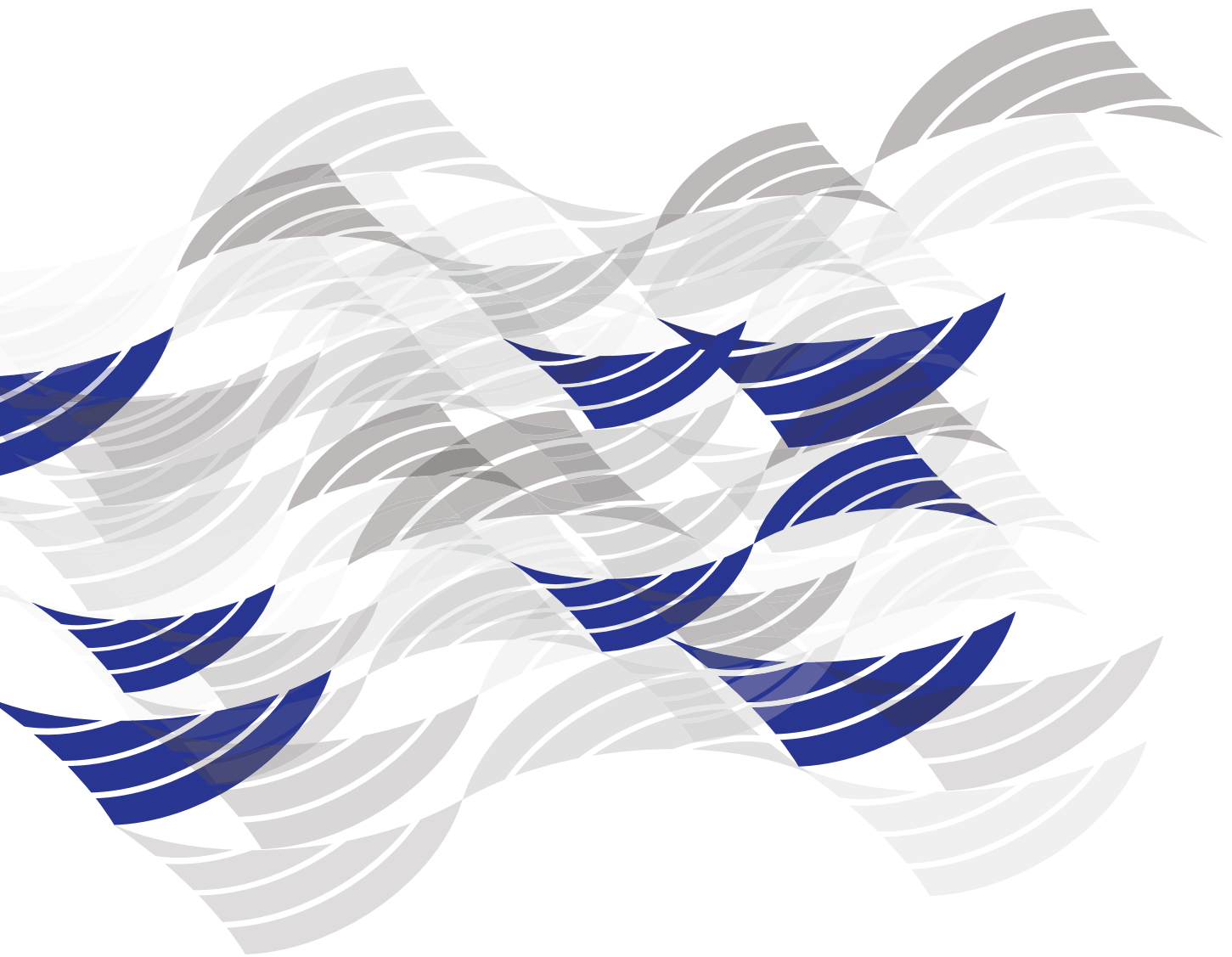
About the Authors

Ellen Van Velsor, PhD, is a senior fellow at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®). Her areas of expertise include the use and impact of feedback, gender differences in leader development, how managers learn from experience, and the dynamics of executive derailment. Ellen is an editor of the Center for Creative Leadership's *Handbook of Leadership Development* (Jossey-Bass, 1998; 2003; 2010) and is coauthor of *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America's Largest Corporations?* (Addison-Wesley, 1987; 1991). Before joining CCL, Ellen was a postdoctoral fellow in adult development at Duke University. She holds MA and PhD degrees in sociology from the University of Florida.

Clemson Turregano, PhD, is a senior faculty member and director of CCL's Government Sector. He designs and delivers leadership programs for senior military and government officials. Clemson is a trained strategic planner and a former mentor for senior Afghan and coalition officials. A retired Tank Battalion Commander with experience in the Balkans, he has published extensively on his experiences in mentoring and coaching emerging leaders in underdeveloped countries. He earned a master's degree in security and strategy from the US Army War College and MPA, master's and doctorate degrees in political science from Syracuse University.

Bill Adams, PhD, is a senior faculty member at CCL who designs and delivers leadership programs for the public sector. Bill is a former career military officer and former director of the Center for Enhanced Performance at West Point. He and his staff developed and delivered a performance enhancement curriculum to more than 15,000 Army leaders that is credited with improving organizational performance in a combat zone and led to the creation of nine Army Centers for Enhanced Performance. He is a former professor of military science at Duke University, where he coauthored an Army ROTC leadership curriculum used by more than 470 colleges and universities nationwide.

John Fleenor, PhD, leads the Center's global research in instrument development and psychometric methods. He is a coauthor of four books on 360-degree feedback: *Using 360-degree Feedback in Organizations* (1997); *Choosing 360: A Guide to Evaluating Multi-rater Feedback Instruments for Management Development* (1997); *Feedback to Managers: A Review and Comparison of Multi-Rater Instruments for Management Development* (1998); and *Leveraging the Impact of 360-degree Feedback* (2008). John holds a PhD in industrial/ organizational psychology from North Carolina State University (NCSU) and serves as an adjunct member of the psychology faculties at both NCSU and the University of North Carolina-Charlotte.

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+1 800 780 1031   +1 336 545 2810   info@ccl.org

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CCL - Americas
www.ccl.org
+1 800 780 1031 (US or Canada)
+1 336 545 2810 (Worldwide)
info@ccl.org

Greensboro, North Carolina
+1 336 545 2810

Colorado Springs, Colorado
+1 719 633 3891

San Diego, California
+1 858 638 8000

CCL - Europe, Middle East, Africa
www.ccl.org/emea

Brussels, Belgium
+32 (0) 2 679 09 10
ccl.emea@ccl.org

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
+251 118 957086
LBB.Africa@ccl.org

Johannesburg, South Africa
+27 (11) 783 4963
southafrica.office@ccl.org

Moscow, Russia
+7 495 662 31 39
ccl.cis@ccl.org

CCL - Asia Pacific
www.ccl.org/apac

Singapore
+65 6854 6000
ccl.apac@ccl.org

Gurgaon, India
+91 124 676 9200
cclindia@ccl.org

Shanghai, China
+86 21 6881 6683
ccl.china@ccl.org

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